

International Organizations as an Instrument of Foreign Policy

by Jonathan E. Sanford

A World of Diversity

In 1992, there reportedly were 1,147 international organizations (IOs) active on the world stage.¹ More than a third (340) were created by formal international agreements among countries. Most of the rest were created by existing international bodies. Many IOs play an important role in the current international system. It is hard to imagine how world affairs would operate, for example, without international bodies such as the United Nations and its affiliates, international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, or functional bodies such as the Universal Postal Union or the International Civil Aviation Organization. Nevertheless, the record shows that international organizations are not permanent fixtures on the world scene. They are being created and dying all the time. Shanks *et al.* note that more than a third of the IOs in existence in 1981 were defunct by 1992, while enough new organizations were created to raise by 84 the total number of IOs that were operating in 1992.

The United States belongs to about one quarter of the international organizations that were created by international agreements among states. The U.S. Department of State manages U.S. participation in approximately 50 international bodies. The U.S. Treasury supervises U.S. participation in about 12 international financial institutions. Other U.S. agencies also play a significant role in monitoring U.S. participation in other international bodies.

The term "international organization" covers a host of divergent organizations. Some, such as the United Nations Security Council, the U.N. General Assembly, or the Organization of

¹Cheryl Shanks, Harold K. Jacobson, and Jeffrey H. Kaplan. *Inertia and Change in the Constellation of International Governmental Organizations, 1981-1992*. *International Organization* 50:4 (Autumn 1996), pp. 593-627.

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American States (OAS) are general purpose organizations whose charter allow them to address virtually any issues that interest their members. Others, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the multilateral development banks (MDBs), technical bodies such as the International Telecommunications Union or the World Meteorological Organization are limited by their charters to particular types of activities or functions. Some bodies -- the annual summit meeting of the leaders of the seven largest market economies (the G-7) or the gatherings convened by the French Treasury at the Louvre to bring debtor countries together with their official creditors (the "Paris Club") -- have no formal structure even though they meet regularly and conduct important international business. International organizations employ a host of decision-making procedures. Most use a one-country, one vote protocol, where each country has the same formal say in IO decisions regardless of its size or power. Others use a weighted voting procedure, where the vote of each member will vary depending on the amount it contributes towards the financial cost of the organization. Some operate on the basis of consensus or informal agreement among the participants with no official enumeration of votes.

Frustrations

American policy-makers often bemoan the difficulty they have developing an agreed U S policy towards international organizations. Many international bodies deal with issues that have numerous facets that each touch the interests or concerns of U S Government agencies in different ways. Generally, the final authority to instruct the U S representatives at an international agency has been vested by law in a particular agency head. The Secretary of State has the final authority, for example, for most United Nations agencies and most regional or functional organizations, while the Secretary of the Treasury has the final authority to instruct the

U S representatives at the IMF or the multilateral development banks (MDBs) This does not necessarily limit, however, the vigor with which other agencies will press their views on State or Treasury when those agencies believe their activities are materially affected by IO issues In some cases, interagency coordinating procedures have been created to allow other agencies a venue for formal input into the policy process Tempers can be frayed at times, when the various agency representatives see issues and U S priorities differently, but the process also helps policy-makers avoid making errors because their agencies lacked special information about particular issues

The policy process in the IOs can be frustrating as well Decisions are often reached through what seems to be a legislative process Resolutions must be drafted, public statements on behalf of the U S policy position must be prepared, and the votes must be solicited (often one-by-one on a retail basis) from other delegations In many cases, the member country governments who instruct those delegations will have goals or concerns in addition to those touched by the immediate resolution at hand Consequently, the process of building support for a U S policy initiative may require bargaining or persuasion on a range of other issues In many IOs, it often seems that the deciding vote on complex international questions may be given to small distant countries that have little direct interest or involvement in the issues at hand

Expectations

Following World War One, many theorists believed that international organizations could be effective vehicles for resolving international disputes and international problems Indeed, as the academic field called international relations separated itself from political science and historical

studies at this time, this expectation seemed to have been its predominant point of view² Many liberal thinkers agreed with Woodrow Wilson that international organization and international law could be an independent force for peace and justice as well as a counterweight to the perceived negative effects of the traditional international system. Governments would need to explain and justify their policies in the harsh light of public scrutiny and they would no longer be able to monopolize information or manipulate public views. Traditional diplomacy and power politics tended to exacerbate conflicts, the advocates of the new system believed, while the process of open deliberation through international bodies would pressure governments to resolve their disputes by making them vulnerable to the full weight of world public opinion. In effect, they argued, international organizations would become actors and sources of influence in their own right. In a system of collective security, international organizations could both make and enforce world peace. Faced with the prospect that all other countries would attack them if they used force to resolve disputes, countries would settle their disputes peacefully or take them to an international forum for resolution.³ On a more prosaic level, international organizations would also help countries identify and solve functional problems that they had in common.

In some ways, this was a particularly American outlook on international politics. Disputes between the states in the United States have been generally settled by legislative or judicial means. Most Americans in 1919 probably believed that their government's suppression of the American Indians, its annexation of half of Mexico, or its periodic interventions in the Caribbean were more

² See, for example, E.H. Carr, *The Twenty-Year Crisis, 1919-1939* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1940), which is at least as much about the dominant theories of international relations as it is about the international politics of the interwar period.

³ See Mearsheimer's description of the doctrine of collective security, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

an expression of natural processes than they were an exercise in power politics. Confidence in the effective force of public opinion was built into the American constitutional system. It was also, from the very first, in the Declaration of Independence's appeal to "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind," a fundamental element of the American approach to the outside world.

Theorists who are inclined to what they call a more "realist" approach to international politics have generally had less confidence in the efficacy of international organization. They note, for example, that the United Nations and most other international bodies have no way to implement their decisions and that nation states have all the real power in the international system.⁴ They argue, with Mearsheimer, that international institutions "are basically a reflection of the distribution of power in the world. They are based on the self-interested calculations of the great powers, and they have no independent effect on state behavior."⁵ International organizations are at best a marginal factor in world politics, Mearsheimer insists, and they hold little promise of promoting stability in the post-Cold War world.

Many critics of the liberal approach believe that it made people blind to the power vacuum that the 1919 peace settlement created in Eastern Europe. It gave them too much confidence that the peace imposed on Germany could be maintained by legal doctrines, treaties abolishing war, and international conferences and that Germany's efforts to revise the Versailles settlement after 1933 could be contained by peaceful means. Only through bitter experience during the 1930s, E H. Carr and others believe, did policy makers and the public in Britain and other

⁴ Robert O Keohane notes this argument in his *International Institutions: Can Interdependence Work?* *Foreign Policy* 110 (Spring 1998), p 87

⁵ John J. Mearsheimer *The False Promise of International Institutions* *International Security* 19 3 (Winter 1994/95), p 7

countries rediscover the limits of liberal internationalism and the underlying role that force must play in effective diplomacy

Cons and Pros

The arguments against the traditional liberal approach to international organizations seem formidable. First, the doctrine of collective security seems untenable and unsupported by historical experience. Mearsheimer notes that the theory of collective security "recognizes that military power is a central fact of life in international politics, and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future."⁶ The problem, however, is the expectation that countries will turn over the direction of their national military force to an international body and they will be willing to use force without regard for their own national interest or their national security. In a traditional alliance system, countries mutually agree that they will use force in specified situations to achieve agreed goals. The doctrine of collective security extends this principle to the point where countries must agree in advance that they will use force in unforeseen situations to achieve unspecified ends. They must do this even if they believe the country they are supposed to fight is in the right, even if war with that country will lead to their probable defeat, and even if they believe their interests would be better served by neutrality or alliance with the presumed target of their attack.

As Mearsheimer notes, the doctrine of collective security requires that countries trust one another, either in their assurances that they are renouncing the use of force or their promises that they will automatically attack future aggressors.⁷ In fact, countries that fail to honor their

⁶Mearsheimer, *op. cit.*, p. 26

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 30

commitments seem more likely to benefit from a system of collective security than are those who remain faithful to their word. Free riders may be able to obtain peace and security for themselves without the cost of war. Also, if they conserve their resources, they may be able to make claims on the combatants at a future date if the latter are weakened by the struggle for collective peace. The possibility that countries may lose if they comply but win if they default on their commitments must have a chilling effect on the future prospects for any system of collective security.

The most vulnerable point in the traditional liberal approach to international organizations is perhaps the presumption that, even though countries will remain sovereign, international bodies should be able to make them comply with their will. The U.N. Charter has a provision that allows for the establishment of an international force subject to its control. To date, however, no major player on the world scene has suggested that this provision be enforced. The state system established in 1648 holds that every country is responsible for its fate and the identification and protection of its national interests. Some small countries might be willing to allow an international body to make some of these decisions for them, especially if they are very weak and vulnerable and their security would be enhanced by this process. No major state, however, is likely to willingly surrender its ability to determine its interests or protect them.

As many analysts have observed, the international system consists of many independent political units having no central authority to regulate their interaction. Ultimately, as Waltz points out,⁸ the international scene is a self-help system in which states may have conflicting goals and interests. States may try to persuade each other as to the efficacy of their views. Ultimately, however, they are on their own in an uncertain world. They can rely on no authority other than

⁸Kenneth Waltz *Man, the State, and War.*

themselves and their own ingenuity to protect their security, their survival, and the preservation of their interests. From the realist point of view, countries may cooperate through international organizations when they believe such cooperation will serve their interests. Mearsheimer argues that the basic rules governing international organizations in this situation must reflect the participating countries' calculations of their own self-interest as well as the international distribution of power. States remain the primary actors in the world system. International institutions are merely convenient arenas, he says, where the relationship among the participating states are governed ultimately by their underlying power relationships.⁹

In the modern age, the idea that international organizations might supersede nation states is vulnerable from an additional perspective. By their very nature, since they are bodies created by governments, international organizations must be run by a type of international civil servant who is accountable to no one government but to several governments simultaneously. This means the managers of international agencies must have some freedom of action and some operational autonomy no matter how closely they may be supervised by their governing boards. This is particularly true in international agencies, such as the IMF, the World Bank, or World Health Organization, which have an arguably technical or functional aspect to their operations. It is likewise true, however, for general political bodies, such as the United Nations, whose leaders must have some ability to maneuver among the often conflicting demands of their member countries if they are to be able to satisfy their broader needs.

This situation can be very disturbing to those who believe strongly that public officials must be kept accountable to the people. Any proposal that would give the international agencies

⁹Mearsheimer, *op. cit.*, p. 13

more authority to carry out their complex tasks would seem to face strong opposition. For example, Senator Jesse Helms, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, has condemned what he believes to be a "global movement towards greater centralization of political power in the hands of elites at the expense of individuals and their local representatives"¹⁰ Senator Helms believes the United Nations has accrued to itself increasing authority, to the point where it is being "transformed from an institution of sovereign nations into a quasi-sovereign entity in itself." That transformation represents, he says, "an obvious threat to U.S. national interests."¹¹ To remedy this situation, Senator Helms proposes that the size of the U.N. staff should be cut in half, many of its committees and functions should be terminated, and its functions should be limited to those which he believes it was originally designed to serve "helping sovereign states coordinate collective action where the will for such action exists."¹²

Senator Helms' argument is not without its critics.¹³ His reservations about international agency officials is not limited, however, to the conservative side of the aisle. Keohane observes, from a rather different political perspective, that there seems to be a kind of "democratic deficit"

¹⁰ Jesse Helms, "Saving the U.N.: a Challenge to the Next Secretary-General," *Foreign Affairs* 75 (September/October 1996), p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ See, e.g., the letters to the editor that appeared in the next issue (vol. 75, November/December 1996) of *Foreign Affairs*. Messrs. Richardson, Laurenti, Williams, and others take Helms to task for erroneous statistics and his seemingly incomplete or one-sided statement of the facts. No one questioned, however, the Senator's concern that expanding the role of the United Nations in the world scene might diminish the degree of control that the public and their elected representatives in U.N. member countries can have over the international organization.

in most of the world's most important international agencies ¹⁴ International institutions are laying down guidelines that their member countries must follow if they want to get loans or attract the foreign investments they need to generate growth and improve their people's standard of living "But these international institutions are managed by technocrats and supervised by high government officials That is, they are run by elites Only in the most attenuated sense is democratic control exercised over major international organizations ¹⁵ New procedures are need, he says, to make the international agencies accountable to democratic publics ¹⁶

These are strong arguments What then remains if one wants to argue the case that international organizations can be a viable tool of foreign policy?

The minimalist argument for international organizations is probably the strongest one that can be made on their behalf Keohane notes that scholars now agree that international institutions "create the capacity for states to cooperate in mutually beneficial ways by reducing the cost of making and enforcing agreements " IOs also provide important venues for cooperation in areas of mutual concern "Even powerful states have an interest, most of the time," he indicates, "in following the rules of well-established international institutions, since general conformity to rules makes the behavior of other states more predictable ¹⁷" More importantly, international agencies provide a framework for discussion and cooperation by states on mutually agreed

¹⁴Robert O Keohane International Institutions Can Interdependence Work? *Foreign Policy* 110 (Spring 1998), p 96

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p 92

¹⁶*Ibid* , pp 93-94

¹⁷*Ibid* , p 86

concerns "The procedures and rules of international institutions create informational structures," Keohane argues "They determine what principles are acceptable as the basis for reducing conflicts and whether governmental actions are legitimate or illegitimate¹⁸

None of these things are the exclusive province of international organizations Countries could establish regular procedures for mutual collaboration, with agreed procedures and criteria, in their regular state-to-state diplomatic relations However, as in religion, so too in diplomacy When the representatives of two or more governments are gathered together on a regular basis, an institution tends to develop Two non-institutions, the G-7 and the Paris Club, are cases in point Originally meeting as ad hoc bodies, they eventually became regular formalized gatherings Procedures were established for dealing with complex issues, agendas were devised to expedite action, and patterns of reciprocity and adherence to norms emerged as countries sought to achieve their basic goals In cases where governments have a great deal of business they need to discuss, the argument for institutionalization of ongoing relationship can be quite powerful

In functional organizations, such as the IMF, the multilateral banks, or the various technical bodies, the charters of the international agencies define the goals or issues that may be raised and the procedures the agency staff and member country governments must follow in order to comply with the rules Adherence to the process does not "depoliticize" their functions, since powerful interests may be affected by international agency decisions However, prior agreement on the appropriate criteria and relevant issues tends to focus the debate into

¹⁸*Ibid* , p 91

constructive channels and lessen the introduction of extraneous issues¹⁹

In more general political bodies, such as the United Nations General Assembly or the Organization of American States, the technical or functional limitations on the range or intensity of debate may not apply. In most cases also, the one-country, one-vote decision rule applies, so the United States and its friends may be outvoted on divisive or controversial issues. Fortunately, however, except for questions of the organizational budget or administration, decisions by these general bodies are not self-executing. The United States and all other countries must give their consent before any policy decision are binding on themselves.

In effect, the general political bodies are debating societies. Diplomats can raise issues or attack the policies of other states in ways they would not likely consider if they had to operate solely within the constraint of normal diplomacy. Indeed, issues can be discussed in these forums that would not likely to be discussed systematically and publicly elsewhere. Comments regarding another country's policies during debate in the UN General Assembly are less likely to stimulate retaliation and frigid diplomatic relations than are similar remarks issued in a bilateral context. Debate in the general political bodies also offers opportunities for diplomats to speak over the heads of foreign governments into the ears of foreign publics. They also offer many opportunities for influencing the way issues are perceived and for shaping the international policy agenda.

¹⁹For example, the IMF and multilateral banks have been able to operate effectively, despite strong differences of perception and interest on the part of their developed and developing country members, because of the functional nature of their work. Issues are debated in terms of economic criteria, rather than the divergent political philosophies or power relationships that separate their member countries. In most cases, the rich countries who bear the costs have the majority voice in agency decisions. But the poorer countries have a significant (though a minority) share of the vote, so they tend to feel that the officials who run the international bodies are generally responsive to their concerns and their voices have weight and their concerns must be addressed in the decision making process.

Favorable decisions by the general political bodies -- particularly decisions by the U N Security Council -- can be invaluable as venues for legitimating trade policy initiatives, coercive diplomacy or economic sanctions, or even exercises in international peacekeeping, force without war, or initiatives such as those targeted against Iraq

The realist school may be right when they say the relationships and patterns of influence among countries in international organizations are shaped and informed by the distribution of power in the international system The United States is able to play a leading role in most international agencies, for example, because it is a powerful actor on the world stage Without a powerful economy and a dynamic military presence, the United States would almost certainly have a smaller say in most international fora But this is to say the obvious The effective use of traditional diplomacy can be vital for persuading other countries to cooperate with the United States or to follow the U S lead in international bodies But, in the absence of sound and persuasive arguments, it may not be sufficient The unsuccessful efforts by the United States to block World Bank lending to Vietnam in 1978 are a case in point

It is difficult to imagine a context in which U S participation in international organizations could be used for covert objectives The public nature of many of these bodies mitigates against such action Even in organizations, such as the international financial institutions, where no public record is kept of countries' arguments or their votes on IFI decisions, covert action is improbable because the other governments at the table would know what the United States did The United States might be able to persuade international agency officials to handle sensitive issues in ways it finds preferable Controversial initiatives of this sort are not likely to be kept secret for long or to be successful if other major member country governments disapprove

In another sense, however, the great strength of the IMF, the multilateral banks, and most other functional organizations is the fact that they can take stronger stands, in their dialog with a potential recipient of their services, than any single country could take in its bilateral relations. The IMF or the World Bank can be more rigorous in their demands for economic policy reform in a prospective borrower country, for example, than the United States could ever be in its bilateral aid program. Likewise, they can more blunt and more effective in their rejection of countries' demands for special consideration or special treatment than the United States could ever be if it received a similar solicitation from a penurious ally or a special friend.

Whether the United States could use international organizations to accomplish immoral or unethical goals is a matter of opinion. The Red Cross and the various international health organizations are probably exempt from such controversies. However, observers might say the U.S. policy position towards the U.N. Family Planning Agency was immoral if it supported or if it disapproved UNFPA assistance to foreign governments whose domestic agencies finance abortion with their own national funds. Likewise, observers would say the United States was pursuing an immoral line of policy if it supported or it opposed initiatives by the United Nations to tighten the sanction regime on Iraq or MDB lending to countries that confiscate foreign investment without prompt, adequate and effective compensation to the former owners. Likewise, there will be controversy if the United States supported or opposed MDB lending to countries that fail to implement market-oriented policy reforms. The same moral considerations that color debate about bilateral policy initiatives are likely to color people's perceptions regarding the morality of IO programs.